

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
DISTRICT OF SOUTH CAROLINA

Patricia T. Patterson,

Plaintiff,

vs.

AutoZone Auto Parts, Inc., *Employer*;
Gallagher Bassett Services Inc., *WCC Carrier*,

Defendants.

) C/A No. 0:10-cv-2438-MBS-BM

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Report and Recommendation

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Background of this Case

The *pro se* plaintiff is a resident of Lancaster, South Carolina. The plaintiff has brought suit against her employer and her employer's carrier of workers compensation insurance. In effect, the plaintiff is challenging the denial of her application for workers compensation benefits. The above-captioned case is the third case filed by the plaintiff in 2010 concerning the denial of her application for workers compensation benefits.

Appended to the complaint are 286 pages of exhibits (Entry No. 1-1 and Entry No. 1-2), although some of the "exhibits" are legal issues argued by the plaintiff in support of her complaint. The plaintiff's exhibits and the complaint show that the Workers Compensation



Commission and the Court of Common Pleas rendered decisions adverse to the plaintiff. The plaintiff alleges that the defendants and others conspired with state court judges and officials to deny her workers compensation benefits to which she is entitled. One exhibit shows that the Honorable Benjamin R. Culbertson, South Carolina Circuit Judge, on September 8, 2009, in Case No. 2008-CP-29-18, affirmed the decision of the South Carolina Workers Compensation Commission (Entry No. 1-1, at page 6), which had been issued on July 27, 2007.¹ The plaintiff, in her prayer for relief, asks that this federal court “void” the judgments entered on September 8, 2009, and on March 26, 2010, and award her “WCC benefits with November 14, 2005 permanent disability date with 12% interest - unreasonable contested claims, appropriately adjust form 50s, and cost, delayed claims.”

Discussion

Under established local procedure in this judicial district, a careful review has been made of the *pro se* pleadings under 28 U.S.C. § 1915. The review has been conducted in light of the following precedents: *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25 (1992); *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319 (1989); *Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519 (1972); *Nasim v. Warden, Maryland House of Correction*, 64 F.3d 951 (4th Cir. 1995)(*en banc*); *Todd v. Baskerville*, 712 F.2d 70 (4th Cir. 1983); *Boyce v. Alizaduh*, 595 F.2d 948 (4th Cir. 1979) (recognizing the district court’s authority to conduct an initial screening of any *pro se* filing);² *Loe v. Armistead*, 582 F.2d 1291 (4th Cir. 1978); and *Gordon v.*

¹The plaintiff had erroneously filed the appeal with the South Carolina Court of Appeals, which transferred the matter to the Circuit Court (Court of Common Pleas). See Entry No. 1-1, at pages 8, 20, and 26.

²*Boyce* has been held by some authorities to have been abrogated in part, on other grounds, by *Neitzke v. Williams*, 490 U.S. 319 (1989) (insofar as *Neitzke* establishes that a complaint that fails
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Leeke, 574 F.2d 1147, 1151 (4th Cir. 1978). The plaintiff is a *pro se* litigant, and thus the pleadings are accorded liberal construction. See *Erickson v. Pardus*, 551 U.S. 89 (2007)(*per curiam*); *Hughes v. Rowe*, 449 U.S. 5, 9-10 & n. 7 (1980)(*per curiam*); and *Cruz v. Beto*, 405 U.S. 319 (1972). When a federal court is evaluating a *pro se* complaint or petition, the plaintiff's or petitioner's allegations are assumed to be true. *Fine v. City of New York*, 529 F.2d 70, 74 (2nd Cir. 1975).

However, even when considered under this less stringent standard, the complaint is subject to summary dismissal. A plaintiff must plead factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is plausibly liable, not merely possibly liable; *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 173 L.Ed.2d 868, 129 S.Ct. 1937, 1949 (2009); and the requirement of liberal construction does not mean that the court can ignore a clear failure in the pleading to allege facts which set forth a claim currently cognizable in a federal district court. *Weller v. Department of Social Services*, 901 F.2d 387 (4th Cir. 1990). The mandated liberal construction afforded to *pro se* pleadings means that if the court can reasonably read the pleadings to state a valid claim on which the plaintiff could prevail, it should do so, but a district court may not rewrite a petition or complaint to include claims that were never presented, *Barnett v. Hargett*, 174 F.3d 1128, 1133 (10th Cir. 1999), or construct the plaintiff's or petitioner's legal arguments for him or her, *Small v. Endicott*, 998 F.2d 411, 417-18 (7th Cir. 1993), or "conjure up questions never squarely presented" to the court, *Beaudett v. City of Hampton*, 775 F.2d 1274, 1278 (4th Cir. 1985).

Federal courts are courts of limited jurisdiction, "constrained to exercise only the authority conferred by Article III of the Constitution and affirmatively granted by federal statute."

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to state a claim, under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6), does not by definition merit *sua sponte* dismissal under 28 U.S.C. § 1915(e)(2)(B)(i) [formerly 28 U.S.C. § 1915(d)], as "frivolous".



In re Bulldog Trucking, Inc., 147 F.3d 347, 352 (4th Cir. 1998). Since federal courts have limited subject matter jurisdiction, there is no presumption that the court has jurisdiction. *Pinkley, Inc. v. City of Frederick*, 191 F.3d 394, 399 (4th Cir. 1999) (citing *Lehigh Mining & Mfg. Co. v. Kelly*, 160 U.S. 327, 337 (1895)). Accordingly, a federal court is required, *sua sponte*, to determine if a valid basis for its jurisdiction exists, “and to dismiss the action if no such ground appears.” *Bulldog Trucking*, 147 F.3d at 352. Further, “the facts providing the court jurisdiction must be affirmatively alleged in the complaint.” *Davis v. Pak*, 856 F.2d 648, 650 (4th Cir. 1988) (citing *McNutt v. General Motors Acceptance Corp.*, 298 U.S. 178 (1936)). To this end, Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 8(a)(1) requires that the complaint provide “a short plain statement of the grounds upon which the court's jurisdiction depends[.]” If, however, the complaint does not contain “an affirmative pleading of a jurisdictional basis, the federal court may [still] find that it has jurisdiction if the facts supporting jurisdiction have been clearly pleaded.” *Pinkley, Inc.*, 191 F.3d at 399 (citing 2 *Moore's Federal Practice* § 8.03[3] (3rd edition 1997)). Such is not the case here.

Generally, a case can be originally filed in a federal district court if there is diversity of citizenship under 28 U.S.C. § 1332 or if there is so-called "federal question" jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. § 1331. Although the absence of subject matter jurisdiction may be raised at any time during the case, determining jurisdiction at the outset of the litigation is the most efficient procedure. *Lovern v. Edwards*, 190 F.3d 648, 654 (4th Cir. 1999). If the court, viewing the allegations in the light most favorable to the plaintiff, finds insufficient allegations in the pleadings, the court will lack subject matter jurisdiction. *Id.*

Here, the defendants are entitled to summary dismissal of this case on several grounds. First they have not acted under color of state law. In order to state a cause of action under



42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege that: (1) the defendant deprived him or her of a federal right, and (2) did so under color of state law. See *Gomez v. Toledo*, 446 U.S. 635, 640 (1980); *American Mfr. Mut. Ins. Co. v. Sullivan*, 526 U.S. 40, 50-52 (1999); and *Hall v. Quillen*, 631 F.2d 1154, 1155-56 & nn. 2-3 (4th Cir. 1980). See also *Lugar v. Edmondson Oil Co.*, 457 U.S. 922, 936 (1982) ("Careful adherence to the 'state action' requirement . . . also avoids imposing on the State, its agencies or officials, responsibility for conduct for which they cannot fairly be blamed."). Although a private individual or corporation can act under color of state law, his, her, or its actions must occur where the private individual or corporation is a willful participant in joint action with the State or with an agent of the State. *Dennis v. Sparks*, 449 U.S. 24, 27-28 (1980). Purely private conduct, no matter how wrongful, injurious, fraudulent, or discriminatory, is not actionable under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 or under the Fourteenth Amendment. See *Lugar v. Edmondson Oil Co.*, 457 U.S. at 936; and *Burton v. Wilmington Parking Authority*, 365 U.S. 715, 721 (1961).³

Whether a private individual's action or corporation's action rises to the level of state action necessarily depends on the relationship between the activity and the State. The inquiry involves "whether there is a sufficiently close nexus between the State and the challenged action . . . so that the action of the latter may be fairly treated as that of the State itself." *Jackson v. Metropolitan Edison Co.*, 419 U.S. 345, 351 (1974). In *Blum v. Yaretsky*, 457 U.S. 991, 1004 (1982), the Supreme Court held that a state is responsible for private action only when it has exercised "coercive power" or has provided "significant encouragement" in the implementation of

³*Burton* involved the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, not 42 U.S.C. § 1983. Federal courts have uniformly held that conduct which constitutes state action under the Fourteenth Amendment also constitutes action under color of state law, insofar as suits under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 are concerned. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48-49 (1988) (collecting cases).



the action. It is also well settled that "a private person does not act under color of state law simply because he invokes state authority." *Brummett v. Camble*, 946 F.2d 1178, 1184 (5th Cir. 1991). See also *Auster Oil & Gas Co., Inc. v. Stream*, 764 F.2d 381, 388 (5th Cir. 1985); *American Mfr. Mut. Ins. Co. v. Sullivan*, 526 U.S. at 50-52 (held: private insurer did not act under color of state law, for purposes of 42 U.S.C. § 1983, when it terminated payment of workers compensation benefits pending review); and cf. *Kreschollek v. Southern Stevedoring Co.*, 223 F.3d 202 (3rd Cir. 2000) (applying holding in *Sullivan* to suit alleging action under color of federal law: termination of LHWCA [Longshoremen and Harbor Workers' Compensation Act] benefits by insurance company did not involve "federal government" action). Since there are no competent allegations in the complaint to give rise to an inference that the defendants have acted under color of state law, see *Allen v. Gunn*, 2009 WL 3561541, *2 (S.D. Miss. Oct. 30, 2009) (litigant's employer and insurance adjuster for the workers' compensation carrier did not act under color of state law: "The Court further concludes that Plaintiff cannot sustain a cause of action against Northrop Grumman or Michelle Gunn. Northrop Grumman and Gunn are not state actors nor were they acting under color of state law; therefore, they are not properly named as defendants in a § 1983 lawsuit."); and *French v. American Airlines*, No. 2:08-CV-638 TS, 2009 WL 1578288 (D. Utah, June 2, 2009) (employer and its insurance carrier did not act under color of state law), there is no basis for federal question jurisdiction in this case.

Further, longstanding precedents preclude the United States District Court for the District of South Carolina from reviewing the findings or rulings made by state courts, including



decisions of a South Carolina Court of Common Pleas.⁴ See *District of Columbia Court of Appeals v. Feldman*, 460 U.S. 462, 476 (1983), where the Supreme Court of the United States held that a federal district court lacks authority to review final determinations of state or local courts because such review can only be conducted by the Supreme Court of the United States under 28 U.S.C. § 1257. See also *Rooker v. Fidelity Trust Co.*, 263 U.S. 413 (1923).⁵ This prohibition on review of

⁴It is well settled that a claimant or employer seeking review of the South Carolina Workers Compensation Commission concerning injuries prior to July 1, 2007, must appeal to the applicable Court of Common Pleas. In turn, if the appeal to the Court of Common Pleas is not successful, the claimant or employer can appeal to the South Carolina Court of Appeals, and, if not successful there, can appeal to the Supreme Court of South Carolina. See, e.g., *Transportation Ins. Co. and Flagstar Corp. v. South Carolina Second Injury Fund*, 2010 WL 3542806 (S.C. Sept. 13, 2010); *Sharpe v. Case Produce Co.*, 336 S.C. 154, 519 S.E.2d 102 (1999); and *Hutson v. S.C. State Ports Authority*, 2010 WL 3543607 (S.C.Ct.App. Sept. 8, 2010). Appeals from the Workers Compensation Commission concerning injuries occurring after July 1, 2007, now go directly to the South Carolina Court of Appeals. *Pee Dee Regional Transp. v. S.C. Second Injury Fund*, 375 S.C. 60, 650 S.E.2d 464 (2007). The plaintiff's appeal was to the Common Pleas because her injuries took place prior to July 1, 2007. *Pee Dee Regional Transp. v. S.C. Second Injury Fund*, 650 S.E.2d at 465 ("Accordingly, the amendments set forth in Act 111 do not apply and, applying the former version of section 42-17-60, jurisdiction over this appeal lies in the Court of Common Pleas. We therefore dismiss the notice of appeal filed in the Court of Appeals and certified to this Court, and the appeal shall instead proceed as filed in the Court of Common Pleas."). The plaintiff's exhibits show that she objected to the transfer of the appeal from the South Carolina Court of Appeals to the Court of Common Pleas.

⁵In civil, criminal, and other cases, the Supreme Court of the United States has reviewed decisions of the Supreme Court of South Carolina that were properly brought before it under 28 U.S.C. § 1257 or that statute's predecessors. See *Green Tree Financial Corp. v. Bazzle*, 539 U.S. 444 (2003), reversing *Bazzle v. Green Tree Financial Corp.* 351 S.C. 244, 569 S.E.2d 349 (2002); *Lucas v. South Carolina Coastal Council*, 505 U.S. 1003 (1992), reversing 304 S.C. 376, 404 S.E.2d 895 (1991); *In Re Primus*, 436 U.S. 412, 432-39 (1978), reversing *In Re Smith*, 268 S.C. 259, 233 S.E.2d 301 (1977)(*per curiam*); *Edwards v. South Carolina*, 372 U.S. 229 (1963), reversing *State v. Edwards*, 239 S.C. 339, 123 S.E.2d 247 (1961); and *Murray v. Charleston*, 96 U.S. 432, 443-49 (1878), reversing *Jenkins v. Charleston*, 5 S.C. 393 (1874). Cf. *Bonner v. Circuit Court of St. Louis*, 526 F.2d 1331, 1336 (8th Cir. 1975)(*en banc*). In *Bonner v. Circuit Court of St. Louis*, the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit pointed out that federal constitutional claims are cognizable in both state courts and in federal courts: "Congress and the federal courts have

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state court proceedings or judgments by federal district courts is commonly referred to as the *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine or the *Feldman-Rooker* doctrine. See, e.g., *Ivy Club v. Edwards*, 943 F.2d 270, 284 (3rd Cir. 1991). The *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine applies even when a challenge to a state court decision concerns a federal constitutional issue. *District of Columbia Court of Appeals v. Feldman*, 460 U.S. at 484-86, and *Arthur v. Supreme Court of Iowa*, 709 F. Supp. 157, 160 (S.D. Iowa 1989). The *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine also applies even if the state court litigation has not reached a State's highest court. *Worldwide Church of God v. McNair*, 805 F.2d 888, 893 & nn. 3-4 (9th Cir. 1986).

This principle was reaffirmed in *Exxon Mobil Corp. v. Saudi Basic Industries Corp.*, 544 U.S. 280, 125 S. Ct. 1517, 161 L.Ed.2d 454 (2005) (*Rooker-Feldman* doctrine applies only when the loser in state court suit files suit in federal district court seeking redress for an injury allegedly caused by the state court's decision itself). See also *Davani v. Virginia Dept. of Transp.*, 434 F.3d 712 (4th Cir. 2006). Therefore, Plaintiff may not pursue the relief she seeks in this Court.

Recommendation

Accordingly, it is recommended that the Court summarily dismiss the above-captioned case *without prejudice*. See *Fitzgerald v. First East Seventh Street Tenants Corp.*, 221 F.3d 362, 363-364 (2nd Cir. 2000) ("District courts . . . are . . . capable of determining when an action is frivolous. Indeed, as courts of first instance, district courts are especially likely to be exposed to frivolous actions, and thus have an even greater need for inherent authority to dismiss such actions quickly in order to preserve scarce judicial resources.").

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consistently recognized that federal courts should permit state courts to try state cases, and that, where constitutional issues arise, state court judges are fully competent to handle them subject to Supreme Court review."



The plaintiff's attention is directed to the important Notice on the next page.



Bristow Marchant
United States Magistrate Judge

October 5, 2010
Charleston, South Carolina



Notice of Right to File Objections to Report and Recommendation

The plaintiff is advised that she may file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation with the District Judge. **Objections must specifically identify the portions of the Report and Recommendation to which objections are made and the basis for such objections.** “[I]n the absence of a timely filed objection, a district court need not conduct a de novo review, but instead must ‘only satisfy itself that there is no clear error on the face of the record in order to accept the recommendation.’” *Diamond v. Colonial Life & Acc. Ins. Co.*, 416 F.3d 310 (4th Cir. 2005) (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 72 advisory committee’s note).

Specific written objections must be filed within fourteen (14) days of the date of service of this Report and Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b); *see* Fed. R. Civ. P. 6(a), (d). Filing by mail pursuant to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 5 may be accomplished by mailing objections to:

**Larry W. Propes, Clerk of Court
United States District Court
Post Office Box 835
Charleston, South Carolina 29402**

Failure to timely file specific written objections to this Report and Recommendation will result in waiver of the right to appeal from a judgment of the District Court based upon such Recommendation. 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140 (1985); *Wright v. Collins*, 766 F.2d 841 (4th Cir. 1985); *United States v. Schronce*, 727 F.2d 91 (4th Cir. 1984).

